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ABSTRACT

One of the most distinctive features of academic departments in community colleges is their multi-disciplinary nature. While the creation of multi-disciplinary departments usually results from pragmatic considerations, they do present some advantages over one-subject departments in that faculty are obliged to learn other disciplines and a system of checks and balances is maintained between the disciplines. The chairs of such departments, however, are faced with unique considerations. First, they must create an inclusive departmental identity through departmental meetings and off-campus retreats in which faculty can identify and discuss goals, interests, and needs that all the disciplines share. Second, chairs must understand the size and politics of the department and identify common interests to offset any rivalry between disciplines. Third, it is important that chairs set standards for good teaching, while at the same time learning what methods work in which discipline. Fourth, it is imperative that chairs become knowledgeable about the disciplines in their departments by listening to faculty, reading, or taking courses with leading faculty. Fifth, chairs must provide leadership for all the disciplines represented in the department, and sixth, they must inevitably share decision-making duties with faculty. Finally, chairs should promote professional development activities. Faculty multidisciplinary departments also have responsibilities, including sharing information with the chair and other faculty about their discipline and accepting each other as colleagues. (Includes four sample problem situations in a multi-disciplinary department.) (ECC)

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Chairing the Multi-disciplinary Department

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Abstract

Departments are multi-disciplinary for practical, not intellectual reasons. These departments have distinct advantages, including collegiality, new learning, and an attractive, if tricky system of checks and balances. The Chair must 1) establish the identity of the department; 2) assess its size and politics; 3) establish standards of good teaching; 4) learn about the disciplines in the department; 5) lead; 6) share power; and 7) encourage professional development. The faculty in the multi-disciplinary department also have responsibilities for mutual education and collegiality. Case studies illustrate typical problems in a multi-disciplinary department.

One of the most distinctive features of academic departments in the community college is their multi-disciplinary nature.

Many departments are home to two or more disciplines. Often, these disciplines are reasonably close in spirit or practice -- for example, English and Communications or Speech; Chemistry and Physics; Psychology and Sociology; etc. Four-year institutions also follow this pattern, linking disciplines that are similar in content, pedagogy, teaching loads, and in the professional interests of their faculty. These "unions" thus join faculty whose graduate school studies, professional identities, and sense of mission have a great deal in common.

A community college department can have these characteristics -- and more. It may join even more disparate disciplines, namely those that have different, even wholly unconnected professional identities. Thus, a community college Creative Arts Department may include Art, Speech, Drama, and Journalism. Foreign Languages and Philosophy may be linked, as are History and Social Sciences, or Math and Biology, and so on. Taken to its extreme form, a community college department may function solely as an administrative unit, a "Department of Miscellany," as it were, which administers programs that simply do not fit elsewhere. For example, a Department of Public Service may join Child Development; Fire Service Officer; Law Enforcement; Hospitality; Legal Assistant; etc. The chair of such a department has a "dean-like" task to become acquainted with all of these disciplines, not to mention their faculty -- full-time and part-time -- plus their needs and interests. Above all, this Chair needs to be a good listener!

My observations and suggestions focus primarily on the less extreme multi-disciplinary department, the one which houses one or several disparate disciplines. Certainly some of my comments pertain to department Chairs who are in charge of closely related disciplines -- such as Chemistry and Physics -- and also to Chairs who administer wholly unrelated disciplines and programs. Yet my primary interest is to illuminate the problems and the potential that confront the Chair of the department with two or more unrelated disciplines.

First, I note some of the reasons multi-disciplinary departments exist at all. Second, I mention some distinctive advantages of working in a multi-disciplinary department (hereafter generally called "the department"). And then I discuss departmental responsibilities of the Chair and the faculty.

1) Raison D'Etre: Why a Multi-Disciplinary Department?

Why would anyone ever plan a multi-disciplinary department? Certainly no one would ever think to join faculty from different disciplines. In fact, the reason for doing so is virtually always pragmatic. Disciplines may band together in a department to avoid any one department from becoming too small, relative to others at the college. Or disciplines may be moved from one department to another in order to prevent a department from becoming too large (and possibly too powerful). In other cases, Chairs may need to have their work loads made equitable. All else being equal, a Chair responsible for fifty part-time faculty leads a very different life from a Chair responsible for a dozen part-timers. Size plays an important role in the life of a department, so it is a reasonable criterion for determining which disciplines join together in a department.

And economics can play a very large role in the configuration of academic departments. Three program areas may not individually be large enough to have three different Chairs, but there may be sufficient justification for one -- or, in my experience, one and two-thirds of a Chair! Finally, architecture plays its familiar role in the academic department: a group of faculty may fit into a building or a particular wing of a building, and they therefore become a department.

The pragmatics of such arrangements actually work to the benefit of the departments. Most community college faculty come from graduate school programs that are autonomous or large, and they leave graduate school with a strong disciplinary identity, which is good. Once teaching, however, faculty discover that no community college departments have such breadth or depth, and they also discover that they share offices and work on departmental committees with colleagues from wholly different academic disciplines. Thus, the Art graduate and the Speech graduate know that an administration has not joined them in the same department in order to frustrate or marginalize them, but to insure that they have jobs, courses, and students. At least in theory, intellectual goals play very minor roles in the creation of academic departments (though, of course, politics can play a major role).

2) Advantages of the Multi-disciplinary department

This department has some real advantages over its "purer" counterpart. Faculty are obliged to learn about other disciplines. Collegiality is a fact of daily life, and it can easily substitute for the greater diversity of disciplines often found on four-year campuses. And becoming acquainted with other disciplines can lead to opportunities for team-teaching.

Working by and with colleagues from other disciplines can also prevent faculty from becoming insular or parochial. Their ideas, methods, and interests are under the constant scrutiny of colleagues who ask the unexpected question, offer the unanticipated comment, or suggest the odd parallel. These observations rarely come from colleagues in one's own discipline, and so a unique collegiality can develop in the community college department.

Multiple disciplines in a single department offer an immediate system of practical checks and balances. A group of faculty in one discipline naturally advocate and defend their own discipline, but departmental colleagues in a different discipline naturally see matters of special interest differently. For example, a group of faculty in one discipline may feel a major budget request has complete merit, while faculty in a different discipline will ask hard and -- yes, sometimes self-interested -- questions about the request. These different viewpoints must come to bear eventually, and the sooner, the better.

In the multi-disciplinary department, faculty are always in the position of thinking of their own discipline in larger contexts and in relation to other disciplines, which is valuable since our students do the same every day.

3) Responsibilities of the Chair

A) Identity of the Department

From the outset, the Chair must create an inclusive departmental identity. The Chair must foster the awareness that the department is multi-disciplinary and that none of the disciplines is second-rate or lesser than the other disciplines in the department. Since the Chair typically teaches in and/or has a degree in one of these disciplines, it is important to establish the Chair's identity as a Chair for all the department's disciplines, not simply the Chair's own.

How to establish this identity? Depending on the history of the department, the Chair may need to encourage faculty to study themselves as a department and thereby establish the goals and needs common to all its disciplines. Faculty thereby appreciate how they can profit by being joined. And they should be encouraged to inventory their differences. Differences may be less extensive than originally perceived, but they may also be rich, subtle, and significant, and colleagues will need to learn to acknowledge these. Faculty quickly learn that the other disciplines in the department are not going to "go away," even if one of the disciplines is much smaller than the others.

Department meetings can also establish this identity. They should be dedicated to the interests and needs common to all the disciplines, and these

account for a significant amount of what occurs in a departmental meeting. Obviously, faculty in individual disciplines should work out questions about teaching, texts, academic goals, etc. on their own and present results to the larger group -- but it is important that the department as a whole know about them. Otherwise, faculty have a disciplinary, but no departmental identity. And the absence of a departmental identity can have harmful effects when major decisions on hiring, tenure, promotion, and money need to be made.

The name of the department really does matter. It should be as inclusive as possible. This may result in awkwardly long titles, but at least faculty thus feel some measure of departmental identity. A "Sciences Department" may not thrill the biologists and chemists who comprise 95% of faculty in the department, but it will include and satisfy the one physicist and the one geologist in the department. Avoid implying a discipline -- e.g., thinking that a Department of English implies Reading and English as a Second Language. No one wants to be an implication, particularly a faculty member who has pursued a higher degree in a discipline. Faculty who feel professionally acknowledged work harder!

It may be productive to have a one-day retreat -- preferably off-campus and supported by the dean -- to produce a three- or five-year plan for the department. Doing so will help faculty articulate their common interests, and it will focus their energies on the future, which is always more ideal than the present.

B) Size and Politics of the Disciplines

The Chair should assess the various disciplines represented in the department and consider how they relate to each other. Are the various disciplines approximately the same size and similar in content and pedagogy? Such similarities can produce easy and immediate collegiality: French and Spanish teachers have plenty to share. But they can also produce deep rivalries. The Spanish teachers may have significantly more students and feel they deserve more teaching aids, while the French teachers may feel that if they don't have as many supplements as the Spanish teachers do, they will lose students. Or Psychology and Sociology faculty, whose turf overlaps, may distrust each other far more readily than Psychology and History faculty, who feel they have relatively little other than human behavior in common. Similarities in content and pedagogy may actually provoke faculty to explore and emphasize their differences: again, disciplinary identity is important to all faculty. And these differences can lead to unnecessary divisiveness and assertions (sometimes direct, but more often subtle) of superiority. In such situations, the Chair needs to identify the common interests and needs of the faculty and insist that these constitute the real agenda of the faculty -- at least at the departmental

level. A strong departmental identity can easily coexist with strong disciplinary identities.

Or does the department house "minority" disciplines -- namely those with far fewer faculty and credit hours than the "majority" discipline(s)? This is a far more typical situation in a community college. Its dangers are far less exciting than those of a bloody rivalry between evenly matched pairs, but they can become pervasive. Faculty in a minority discipline can become marginal, perceiving that power, money, and the future lie with the majority discipline(s). Marginal faculty can become frustrated, resigned, and obscure -- as then do their programs and their students. Below I address some ways to deal with these problems.

C) Standards of Good Teaching

In a department composed of disparate disciplines, whose teaching methods may vary widely, the Chair needs to establish a consensus about successful teaching. A cross-disciplinary departmental committee may define good teaching in broad terms, or the Chair may simply share a definition with the faculty member as part of -- and early in -- the evaluation process.

Misunderstandings about differences in pedagogy across disciplines are among the knottiest the department Chair ever confronts. Some disciplines rely heavily on lectures, while also relying on one-to-one contact in labs. Other disciplines favor mini-lectures supplemented by class discussion, small group work, collaborative projects, student presentations, etc. And some disciplines heavily emphasize an individual student's abilities as measured by relatively standardized tests -- e.g., developmental courses in Mathematics and Reading. The Chair needs to learn what methods work in which disciplines, and how a faculty member may best mix these approaches, when appropriate. The Chair who appreciates (and who is perceived as appreciating) these differences may praise or criticize teaching effectively. The Chair who does not will inevitably encounter a faculty member who maintains the Chair does not know the discipline and therefore cannot judge teaching in it. And, in fact, the Chair evaluating a different discipline may need to concentrate more heavily on those characteristics of good teaching that are common to all classrooms: excited, engaged students; questions and answers; mutual respect; obvious, precise organization; clear expectations; etc.

D) The Education of the Department Chair

Not surprisingly, the best long-term strategy for nurturing a multi-disciplinary department is education.

Chairs must educate themselves about the various disciplines represented in their department. The simplest and best method is simply to listen to faculty in those disciplines (and, if necessary, encourage them to talk with you about their discipline). As teachers, they will appreciate your interest in their fields, and this is a quick, accurate way for the Chair to become acquainted both with the field and the faculty member. Ask about trends and developments; ask about a favorite professor or course in graduate school; ask about the use of computers in the field -- is there any field computers have not affected?; ask about plans for new curriculum; new texts; new courses; etc.

The Chair can also read about the discipline. This may range from perusing the table of contents of a text to picking up a professional journal or book to reading something the faculty member has written. See what is "hot" and what is canonical in the field.

The truly committed Chair may even sign up for a course in the discipline. There is no better way to become acquainted with the full dynamics of a discipline than to study it. Here I can speak from personal experience. My degree is in English, and my department includes Foreign Languages. I have taken courses in both Latin and Chinese, neither of which my department offers. Doing so has shown me a great deal about the teaching of foreign languages, including the value of a tremendous variety of (sometimes expensive) teaching aids. This has improved my ability to work with foreign language faculty, and, I think, deepened their trust for me. (Incidentally, I enrolled in these courses elsewhere, so my learning did not complicate my evaluation of foreign language faculty.)

A faculty member who senses that the Chair is interested in the discipline will have hope for the discipline, regardless of whether or not the Chair has any academic credentials in the discipline. Trust, respect, and opportunity are the basic bonds between the Chair and the faculty member.

E) Leadership

There are limits to listening, reading, and altruistic learning, however, and the Chair must avoid retraining as a "jack-of-all-disciplines," or becoming a generalist out of touch with one's own field or a lifetime student of colleagues who are instead looking to the Chair for leadership. It is possible to develop competency in a discipline without studying it endlessly or to the point of risking one's authority or integrity. The strong Chair will become educated about a department's disciplines, while also serving as the leader or advocate for them -- and others.

The real challenge is to lead in areas in which one's own expertise is limited. But the Chair who has listened, read, and learned has the advantage of at least some expertise in the field and can certainly identify problems and opportunities. Deans do this all the time, and the community college Chair must appropriate some of these responsibilities.

F) Power Sharing

This is inevitable and necessary. Given the array of responsibilities and disciplines represented in the community college department, the Chair must share power. No Chair could hope to be equally proficient in all a department's disciplines, so the Chair must share decision-making with faculty in those areas.

Ideally, a trust develops over time, and faculty thus rightly believe that they have some control over the destiny of their department and their discipline. For example, a senior faculty member in Biology can evaluate junior and part-time faculty in Biology, and this evaluation may complement the Chair's. Similarly, faculty within the discipline should exercise a major voice in hiring decisions, curriculum development, planning, etc.

The Chair may not always agree with the recommendations and judgments of colleagues who evaluate, but that may be equally true when the Chair makes recommendations too. The real issue is disciplinary identity, and faculty within the discipline have both the obligation and responsibility to develop this -- along with the Chair. Sharing power can also acquaint faculty with the complexities of decision-making among creative people who teach. Colleagues who are enlightened about this process will better understand and judge each other's decisions.

Sharing power brings up the issue of sharing resources, namely the departmental budget. Allocating resources equitably can be a real challenge for the Chair, particularly when faculty in different disciplines use different criteria for deciding how to spend money or identify their own discipline's needs as paramount. Should departmental money be allocated according to the number of faculty in a discipline? According to credit hours generated? Or should the pedagogical needs of a discipline take precedence? ("We use computers in Computer Science; therefore we will always need most of the Math/Computer Science Department budget.") And what role should the recent pattern of allocations play? ("Social Sciences has spent most of the Social Sciences/History budget for three years in a row. This year History gets the lion's share, while Social Sciences should get nothing!") Money can easily divide the disciplines within a department, yet it lacks the ability to unite them.

Solutions are occasionally easy. In concert with the faculty, the Chair must decide what the department's priorities are. Thus, if the faculty have determined that computer upgrades are really important over the next thirty-six months, the Chair's decision not to buy new audio-visual equipment is easy and easily-defended. And sometimes the Chair can identify ways to share resources. If the Art faculty prevail in their desire to upgrade computers, perhaps the Journalism faculty in the department can share the computers even though their request to publish the paper weekly rather than monthly has been denied. Needless to say, establishing priorities ahead of time greatly simplifies decisions about money.

But difficult situations do arise, especially when faculty do not fully agree on departmental priorities. Now, as always, the Chair needs to do what seems right, explain the decision to the faculty, and let the matter rest. Someone else may have made a different decision, but that is really self-evident. And, if appropriate, the Chair can organize the faculty to seek additional money the next year.

Two further observations about money: Avoid "worrying" it in front of the faculty. No one expects community colleges to be awash in money, and discussing it frequently or in detail accomplishes little. The faculty expect the Chair to make decisions.

The Chair can also identify resources that are not associated with money. If one discipline "loses out" to another for departmental money, perhaps they can receive improved classrooms, different scheduling, different offices, better library acquisitions, etc. Money seems like the simplest determinant of success, but a program needs much more than money to succeed. And, years later, many faculty forget that they could not get a new VCR, but they remain delighted with their new office or classroom.

G) Professional Development

Encouraging faculty to develop themselves professionally is important in any department. How to do so in a multi-disciplinary department is somewhat more complicated. All faculty should receive encouragement to read, write, and remain active in their discipline, attend and make presentations at conferences, etc.

Faculty members in the "minority" discipline in a department are at a particular risk because there are few or no colleagues with whom to interact. These faculty need particular encouragement and, as the case may be, additional money to stay active in their fields. Left alone, they are far more likely to become stagnant than faculty who have disciplinary colleagues within the

department. An excellent forum for faculty is a two-minute verbal summary of attendance at a conference or a new teaching experience, presented at the department meeting. This allows the faculty member to make a transition from the conference to the classroom, while also educating other faculty about what is new in the discipline.

4) Responsibilities of the Faculty

Fortunately, the Chair need not bear the complete responsibility for the life of the department. The faculty in the disciplines need to cooperate with the Chair and with each other in order to insure the department actually works.

A) The Education of the Faculty

Above I have repeatedly mentioned the importance of the faculty sharing information about their disciplines, so faculty in multi-disciplinary departments need to develop the patience for and interest in their colleagues' disciplines. Most faculty are teachers, not preachers, and, if encouraged and provided the proper forums, they will be happy to inform the Chair and colleagues about their disciplines. These exchanges should be ongoing, not just when something goes wrong -- as in a negative evaluation -- and not just when some faculty want something -- such as an expensive site license. Ideally, such exchanges are brief and informative, not extended or didactic.

B) Collegiality

Above I have also mentioned the importance of faculty accepting each other as colleagues. While the Chair can encourage this, only the faculty can make collegiality happen.

A convenient way to insure the faculty work together is to organize a departmental committee system that, whenever appropriate, crosses disciplinary boundaries. Faculty from different disciplines can serve on the departmental Computer Committee, Curriculum Committee, Instructional Resource Committee, Hiring Committee, etc. And faculty from "minority" disciplines should have the opportunity to chair these committees: if the Chair is going to share power, so must the faculty! Collaboration at the committee level insures that faculty from different disciplines are working together at the initial stages of any proposal. When a multi-disciplinary department works well, its diversity works to the benefit of everyone.

Recognizing that it does not always work as planned, I have listed cases that present typical problems for the Chair of a multi-disciplinary department.

CASES

Case 1: Cross-Disciplinary Skirmishes

A faculty member in one discipline criticizes the minimum teaching competencies -- or the absence of them -- held by faculty who cross over from related fields.

For example, a History professor criticizes the use of Government faculty (who lack degrees in History) to teach History courses. The Government faculty need these courses for a full teaching load.

The faculty in the two disciplines have become polarized.

What should the Chair do?

Case 2: Disagreements about money

Faculty in your department but outside your discipline want to use department money to make a major purchase of computer software or hardware. This would exhaust a significant portion of the budget.

You have some significant reservations about the need for the purchase and its utility three to five years from now. The faculty in this discipline produce only about 10% of the credit hours generated by the department.

What should the Chair do?

Case 3: Evaluation, Tenure, and Promotion

The department includes two major but different disciplines. The department has weathered several bruising tenure and promotion recommendations, which are made by the entire department.

Some faculty want to limit personnel decisions to faculty within the discipline, but others do not.

What should the Chair do?

Case 4: The Allegedly Unqualified or Under-qualified Evaluation

A faculty member challenges a negative teaching evaluation you have made, citing your lack of credentials in the discipline. The teaching evaluation is part of an application for promotion. You are a relatively new Chair and have not evaluated this person's teaching before. The faculty member is one of two in the discipline, but the other is untenured and thus disinclined to get involved in the dispute. The dean has a degree in yet another discipline.

What should the Chair do?